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Early Education Essentials

Illustrations of Strong Organizational Practices in Programs Poised for Improvement

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**EARLY
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UCHICAGO Consortium
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ABOUT THE OUNCE OF PREVENTION FUND

The Ounce of Prevention Fund is a public-private partnership dedicated to giving all children, especially those from low-income communities and families, the best chance for success in school and in life. We provide, research, and advocate for high-quality early childhood from birth to age five, giving young children the physical, cognitive, social and emotional development they need to develop and learn. Working at the intersections of practice, policy, and research, the Ounce aims to be the nation's most trusted resource of early childhood knowledge.

ABOUT THE UCHICAGO CONSORTIUM

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working. The UChicago Consortium is a unit of the Urban Education Institute.

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To read the research behind this snapshot, visit:
www.theounce.org/eee-qualitative-report

Early Education Essentials

Extensive evidence demonstrates that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) positively impacts the learning trajectories of children, especially those from vulnerable populations. Yet many early childhood programs struggle to implement high-quality programming effectively and as a result fail to sufficiently advance children's readiness for kindergarten. One particularly effective method for lifting program quality, as demonstrated by a growing body of research, is to strengthen the organizational conditions surrounding practice. But this begs the question: What do strong organizational conditions look like in ECE settings?

The new Early Education Essentials measurement system, developed by the Ounce of Prevention Fund (Ounce) and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium), offers the field a reliable and valid way to measure, attend to and strengthen these conditions critical to improvement. This innovative resource includes teacher/staff and parent surveys, as well as data-use and improvement tools.

Throughout development and testing of the *Early Education Essentials* surveys, practitioners, researchers, and systems leaders have asked us what ECE programs that score high (well-organized) and low (weakly organized) on the *Early Education Essentials* surveys look like and feel like to staff and families experiencing those conditions daily. In response, a team of researchers from the Ounce and the UChicago Consortium spent three consecutive days in four ECE sites whose teacher/staff and parent survey responses

to the *Early Education Essentials* surveys indicated that their essential supports were either very strongly organized or very weakly organized. Differences in their organizational climates and conditions were unmistakable. Well-organized programs created organizational contexts far more supportive of teaching, learning, and family engagement than programs that were weakly organized.

By providing contrasting descriptions of strongly and weakly organized programs, this qualitative study helps educators, policymakers, and families understand how and why these essential supports at strong programs empower staff and families to create better outcomes for children. Additional analysis of programs strongly organized to the six key essentials for ECE settings—including more themes, illustrative quotes, and longer comparison tables—can be found in the full qualitative report (see www.theounce.org/eee-qualitative-report).¹

Study Overview

SAMPLE:

- Four sites (from those participating in the *Early Education Essentials* validation study)
- Two sites with high and two sites with low *Early Education Essentials* survey scores: one school- and one community-based site for each

DATA:

- Site visits lasting three consecutive days, using structured protocols to capture in-depth information about what the essential supports look like and how they are experienced by staff and family members in the ECE site.

DATA COLLECTION INCLUDED:

- Individual interviews of leaders and teachers, and group interviews with family members
- Observations of common area environments, activities, and interactions
- Photographic documentation of common area spaces and displays

Research Findings

Early Education Essentials Measures the Strength of Organizational Conditions

The new *Early Education Essentials* parent and teacher/staff surveys were created using the five essentials supports framework² and existing K-12 *5Essentials* surveys.³ Researchers adapted the teacher survey and created a new parent survey for ECE settings. We previously conducted a validation study⁴ which found the surveys are reliable across settings, and responses are valid because most essential scores are significantly related to site-level outcomes, including teacher-child interactions and children's attendance. We also found that parents offer a unique perspective best captured by a distinct essential, which we titled Parent Voice.

Figure 1 shows the six essentials of the *Early Education Essentials* framework and surveys.

In the following pages we summarize qualitative findings describing the organizational conditions and practices in ECE programs with strong and weak essential supports. Note that we do not summarize findings for Parent Voice because our original study design was based on the original framework with five essentials.

FIGURE 1

The Six Essentials within Early Education Essentials



Empower

“It’s empowering here... I have something to share, and it’s valued by our administrator.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT: Effective Instructional Leaders

In programs where the Effective Instructional Leaders essential was strong, leadership positively impacted teaching, children's learning, and engagement of families through a strong, purpose-driven vision for developmentally appropriate and ambitious early childhood education. By cultivating shared leadership and excellence in teaching and learning, leaders empowered teachers and families to embrace the important roles they had in making the vision for the program a reality.

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders communicate a vision that is purpose driven and rooted in developmental science and developmentally appropriate practice.	1. Leaders communicate a vision that is compliance driven to the myriad program standards and funder requirements.
2. Leaders establish a small number of actionable goals tied to program standards and their vision for the program. They problem-solve implementation issues with staff.	2. Leaders pass along written program guidance they receive with the expectation that staff will figure out how to change their practice to implement new requirements properly.
3. Leaders create a warm and professional work environment , expecting staff to focus on practice and cultivating children's love of learning.	3. Leaders create a rigid work environment , expecting staff to comply in highly procedural ways with program standards.
4. Leaders help staff connect to a moral purpose and the reasons they became early educators through their purpose-driven vision and actions.	4. Leaders make it difficult for staff to prioritize time to focus on practice by overloading them with a compliance-driven vision and actions.
5. Leaders prioritize their time to provide teachers with guidance on teaching and encouragement to critically examine and improve practice and children's learning.	5. Leaders prioritize their time to monitor compliance with funder requirements and respond to teacher requests for assistance by referencing program standards.

“Everybody shares what they’ve seen and the steps that we need to take.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT: Collaborative Teachers

In programs where the Collaborative Teachers essential was strong, leaders championed professional collaboration as the pathway to excellent early childhood education. Teachers had multiple routine opportunities to work together with their colleagues that were scheduled, protected, and attended frequently by their leaders. Teachers were devoted to a professionalized teaching practice that includes innovation, collaboration, and a continual focus on improving children’s learning outcomes.

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders view collaboration as the key to building professional capacity and achieving their vision.	1. Leaders do not view collaboration as key to improving children’s outcomes.
2. Teachers have scheduled and protected time weekly and monthly for peer collaboration and learning , including time weekly for teaching teams to lesson plan together.	2. Teachers do not engage in routine collaboration and rarely have structured time for practice discussions or peer learning.
3. Collaborative time has a clear purpose and is structured by goals, data, and protocols that allow teachers to demonstrate expertise and to learn from each other.	3. Teachers receive minimal active instructional guidance from leaders ; rather, leaders forward memos with program guidance or practice requirements teachers are expected to follow.
4. Teachers use collaborative time to address variations in children’s learning and outcomes by focusing on pedagogical issues, using data to examine practice, and designing innovations.	4. Teachers rarely use children’s data to critically examine instruction . When they do, it is usually done independently and focused only on their own practice.

“They’re willing to try and pull your child in different directions to see what works...



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT: Involved Families

In programs where the Involved Families essential was strong, work was undergirded by the belief that partnerships with families are critical to the staff’s teaching effectiveness and children’s success. Staff sought and were influenced by families’ knowledge and opinions.

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders champion the importance of involving and engaging families and link it to their vision for program success.	1. Leaders do not describe substantial engagement of families as part of their guiding vision for program success.
2. Teachers and staff actively involve families , recognizing that families are integral to the work they do to support children’s adjustment and early learning in the school/center.	2. Teachers and staff do not prioritize family involvement ; rather, teachers are told to let leaders handle “issues” that families bring up about their child or the program.
3. Families learn about the curriculum and the concepts being explored with their child in the classroom and are asked to provide their input and feedback on their child’s experiences .	3. Families may learn about the curriculum or the concepts being explored with their child in the classroom but are not asked specifically to provide input or feedback .
4. Leaders and teachers ensure families are welcome and invited everywhere in the building.	4. Leaders and teachers do not welcome families into classrooms or encourage them to be a part of daily activities in the building.

“Children learn that they have the support. That they feel they can trust us.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT: Supportive Environment

In programs where the **Supportive Environment** essential was strong, all staff worked together to create the most emotionally supportive and developmentally appropriate learning environment they could for young children and their families. Staff intentionally used children's and families' growing sense of security, trust, and calm to expose children to new ideas and tasks.

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders and teachers make the physical space of the school/center embody the leader's vision.	1. Leaders and teachers do not use the physical space to connect the work to their program vision.
2. Common areas are outfitted with child-friendly materials and visual displays of children's work.	2. Common areas have few to no child-friendly materials or displays of children's work.
3. Leaders model and create the expectation that positive, emotionally supportive interactions will occur between teachers and children, and families and teachers.	3. Leaders do not model or create the expectation that emotionally supportive interactions will occur with staff and families.
4. Teachers provide students with emotional supports to increase their self-regulation skills and ability to engage and persist in learning experiences.	4. Leaders and teachers express frustration with children's impulsiveness and social-emotional "issues," stating that the lack of self-regulation makes it harder for them to prepare children for kindergarten.



“Inquiry—If a child has curiosity and a spark ... that leads to life-long learning.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT: Ambitious Instruction

In programs where the Ambitious Instruction essential was strong, leaders and staff held strong commitments to crafting inquiry-based and developmentally appropriate early learning experiences that helped children achieve comprehensive development and learning goals. Social-emotional learning was prioritized and understood as the foundation upon which all other learning goals could be achieved.

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders communicate that social-emotional learning is the priority of the program and foundational to all other learning and development for all students of all abilities.	1. Leaders communicate that discreet skill development is the focus of the program and the curriculum for all students of all abilities.
2. Teachers emphasize inquiry-based learning approaches and the integration of early literacy and math skills development into ongoing investigations that build background knowledge and experience prior to kindergarten.	2. Teachers emphasize rote learning approaches (e.g., number and letter identification, writing name, holding pencil and scissors) to make sure children meet kindergarten readiness goals.
3. Teachers use assessment data to design meaningful learning opportunities that address diverse learning needs.	3. Teachers rarely, if ever, use assessment data while lesson planning; rather, they rely on activities in prepackaged curriculum.
4. Teachers partner with families to develop meaningful learning opportunities at home.	4. Teachers give families homework folders to complete with their child that practice writing letters, numbers, and their name.

Conclusions and Implications

The key takeaway from our findings is that these internal social and organizational conditions greatly affect what teachers do, what parents do, and how staff and families feel about the school/center. These feelings and actions in turn impact the quality of teaching and learning, and ultimately the outcomes children achieve.

Key Considerations for Practitioners and Policymakers in the Field Include:

- **Leaders' vision is key.** Amid the patchwork of funding streams and regulatory systems, the key to driving performance is how program leaders bring coherency to the purpose and focus of the program and buffer staff from fragmented thinking and task-based approaches. Program leaders' developmentally-based vision and facilitative approach define the level of motivation, action, persistence, and happiness of all adults in the site.
- **Collaboration is the vehicle.** Quality is achieved at the local level through program leaders' focusing direction and working collaboratively with teachers, staff, and family members across the school/center community. In programs with strong instructional leadership combined with strong collaboration, leaders and staff care for and trust one another, raise problems of practice, listen to the insights of their peers and children's parents, craft more-supportive learning environments, and persist with innovating and implementing ever-more-effective teaching and family engagement strategies.
- **Policy should support strong organizational conditions.** Our findings call into question the effectiveness of top-down, compliance-oriented organizational structures in early education institutions. Policymakers seeking to retain staff and raise the performance of ECE schools/centers should prioritize policies that promote these essential organizational structures and practices over other program

standards that have not been linked to staff commitment and higher-quality teaching and outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, these data strongly indicate that strengthening the essential supports of effective instructional leadership and teacher collaboration in particular sets up ECE programs to achieve better performance.

School districts, community-based organizations, and all ECE programs stand to benefit from a greater focus on the health of these essential organizational supports and a recognition that quality is about much more than only what happens inside classrooms; ECE needs systems and programs that are organized to support leaders, teachers, staff, and families in the important work of educating young children.

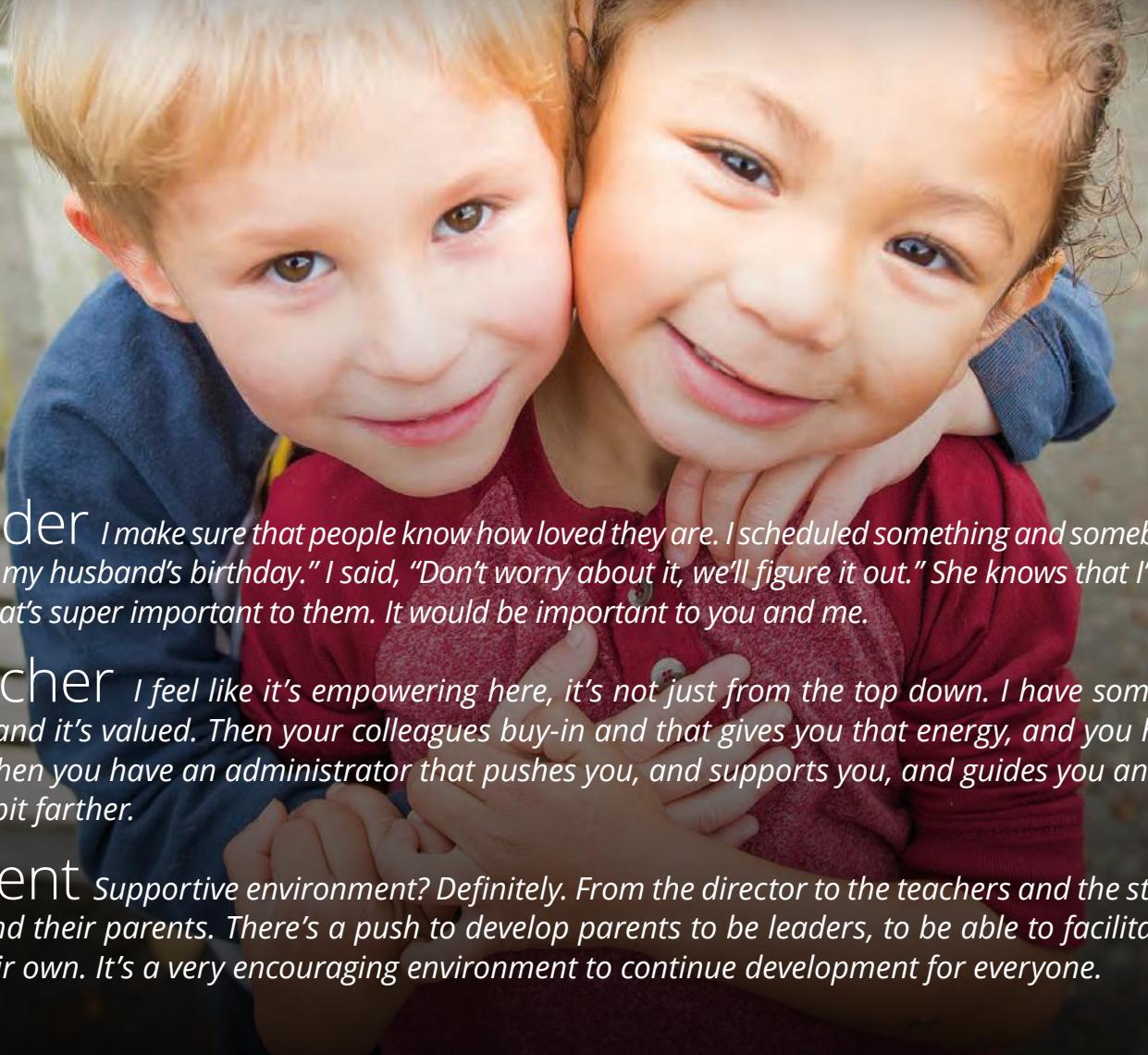
What's Next?

Through ongoing collaboration, the Ounce, the UChicago Consortium, and UChicago Impact continue to bring this research to practitioners and policymakers through the Early Education Essentials measurement system. A growing number of ECE state and program leaders are using the Early Education Essentials and 5Essentials surveys to assess the strength of their organizational conditions and focus attention on these key levers for positive change. Simultaneously, we are using the experiences of early adopters and ongoing research on the Early Education Essentials to strengthen our knowledge, the measurement system, and our understanding of how policies and systems can support strong organizational conditions in ECE settings.

Endnotes

- 1 **Pacchiano, D.M., Wagner, M.R., & Lewandowski, H. with Ehrlich, S.B. & Stein, A.G. (2018).** *Early Education Essentials: Illustrations of strong organizational supports predicting success in early childhood education settings*. Chicago, IL: Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.
- 2 **Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J.Q. (2010).** *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- 3 <https://uchicagoimpact.org/tools-training/5essentials>
- 4 **Ehrlich, S.B., Pacchiano, D.M., Stein, A.G., Wagner, M.R., Luppescu, S., Park, S., Frank, E., Lewandowski, H., & Young, C. (2018).** *Organizing early education for improvement: Testing a new survey tool*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and the Ounce of Preventing Fund.

Voices from the field



Leader *I make sure that people know how loved they are. I scheduled something and somebody said, "That's my husband's birthday." I said, "Don't worry about it, we'll figure it out." She knows that I'll figure it out. That's super important to them. It would be important to you and me.*

Teacher *I feel like it's empowering here, it's not just from the top down. I have something to share and it's valued. Then your colleagues buy-in and that gives you that energy, and you have that love. Then you have an administrator that pushes you, and supports you, and guides you and nudges you a bit farther.*

Parent *Supportive environment? Definitely. From the director to the teachers and the staff to the kids and their parents. There's a push to develop parents to be leaders, to be able to facilitate things on their own. It's a very encouraging environment to continue development for everyone.*



Learn More

The innovative, reliable, and valid Early Education Essentials measurement system, including teacher/staff and parent surveys and data-use and improvement tools, are now available nationwide for use in early childhood education school and community-based settings.

For More Information go to:
theounce.org/eee

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